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The case for spying

For all his reputation as the Nation's Chief espionage agent, Richard McGarrah Helms, of St. Davids, Pa., would cut a poor figure in a spy thriller.

No flair for the dramatic, just a quiet-spoken man in a dark gray business suit, to match the federal agency he has headed the last five years — the Central Intelligence Agency.

In his first public address as CIA director, Mr. Helms also showed himself recently to be a man with a passion for logic and precision, in articulating ideas and in making distinctions.

His topic was spying itself, its role in a "fearsome" world. Spying was not, said Mr. Helms, an optional activity, to be curtailed or abandoned, under pressure of critics who take advantage of the CIA's "traditional" silence to make "vicious and just plain silly charges . . ."

In the last violence-ridden quarter of the 20th Century, Mr. Helms asserted, it was an absolute necessity — despite the fact that the CIA's mission, to help keep the President informed of international developments, may "appear in conflict with some of the traditions and ideals of our society . . ."

The problem posed by the CIA was not eliminating it but "to adapt intelligence work to American society." And in this, Mr. Helms said, the American public would have to accept, "on faith," that he and his CIA associates are "honorable men," devoted to the nation's service and subject to intense scrutiny by the elected leaders of the Federal Government.

It was a persuasive argument Mr. Helms outlined for the American Society of Newspaper Editors meeting in Washington, D.C. And, granted the intense scrutiny Mr. Helms cites, it is an argument the public is disposed to accept.